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SUBJECT: BANGLADESHI NGO "RUPANTAR" IS AGENT OF POSITIVE SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

FORWARD

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¶1. In 1995 Rupantar (Bengali for "transformation") began promoting grassroots democratic organization, efficient and participatory local governance, gender equality and environmental awareness with USAID direct funding. Rupantar is now active in 61 of Bangladesh's 64 Districts focusing its activities at the union parishad level, which is the smallest administrative unit of internal governance in Bangladesh. Rupantar uses citizen committees to encourage more responsive local government and relies on folk theater and traditional style songs to communicate its message to largely illiterate audiences; both of which are proving to be effective mechanisms for social change in Bangladesh. Emboffs visited Botlagari union parishad to assess Rupantar's achievements.

CITIZENS COMMITTEES

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¶2. Emboffs met with the local citizens committee created through Rupantar's "Improving Local Level Governance by Strengthening Union Parishads and Creating Citizen's Awareness" program in Botlagari union parishad of Nilfamari district. These citizens act as an advisory committee working in conjunction with the union parishad's elected officials. The committee members' statements were unanimously positive about the program; one woman commented that as little as three years ago she felt alienated by her local government, but now she feels and acts like a stakeholder. Rupantar encouraged tax reforms which increased local tax revenue by an average of 50 percent in four years. The citizen's forums work with the elected officials in deciding how these locally generated taxes are best spent. The relationship between the Botlagari citizen's committee and the union parishad officials has been so successful, that it is being considered for use as a model for other union parishads.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

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¶3. Rupantar interacts with the overall community in each union parishad through training courses, research, and folk theater. Before and after meeting with the Botlagari citizens committee, emboffs observed a folk theater performance by a Rupantar troupe along with approximately 300 people from the community. That day's theme was leadership, which is just one of over thirty topics which can be presented by Rupantar's troupes. The songs were accompanied by pictures which reinforced the message. With titles like "Necessity of Leaders" and "Inefficient Leadership," the songs were highly critical of corrupt and inept leaders, and according to Embassy FSN, used surprisingly blunt language. A play about the ruin of a leader who gave into the temptation of

corruption followed the songs. Audience interest was high particularly among the children present.

RUPANTAR'S UNIQUE STATUS

¶4. USAID's provision of direct funding to Rupantar is exceptional. USAID has taken this step because Rupantar's organizational goals, budgetary transparency, horizontal organizational schema, and low operating expense set it apart from other Bangladeshi NGOs. Most are hierarchical and therefore susceptible to undetected manipulation from the upper organizational levels. Rupantar received a grant of \$500,000 in 2001, another \$600,000 in 20005, and may be eligible for further aid in 2008. USAID's assistance is effectively communicated to the people through logos on signs displayed at the Rupantar events.

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